

William Conner Prairie Farm
South side of State Highway 234, approximately
seven miles southwest of Noblesville
Noblesville Vicinity
Hamilton County
Indiana

HABS No. IND-40

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

WILLIAM CONNER PRAIRIE FARM

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Location: South side of State Highway 234, approximately seven miles southwest of Noblesville, Noblesville Vicinity, Hamilton County, Indiana

Present Owner: Mr. Eli Lilly, Indianapolis, Indiana

Present Use: Private museum

Brief Statement of Significance: An interesting group of restored buildings on an early Indiana farm, including the first brick house in the "New Purchase" of Indiana, which comprised roughly the central third of Indiana.

Historical and Architectural Information

- I. The following is an article which appeared in the Indiana Architect, Volume 3, No. 10, February 1960 (Indianapolis, Indiana: Don E. Gibson and Associates):

CONNER PRAIRIE FARM

A few miles north of Indianapolis, high on a prairie bluff overlooking a graceful bend in the White River, is one of the State's most carefully preserved and restored bits of early Indiana life.

Portions of Conner Prairie Farm, originally the home of William Conner and presently owned by Mr. Eli Lilly of Indianapolis (under whose direction the restoration has been made), date back to 1801 when William Conner married the daughter of an Indian chief and set up business as an Indian trader in his double cabin trading post. This cabin became the center of a small village of rude huts, encircled by an almost impenetrable forest.

. . . Today, Conner Prairie Farm is a private museum maintained by Mr. and Mrs. Lilly. A number of the log cabins have been restored to their original condition and furnished appropriately. These include the still house, the loom house, the trading post, Conner's original cabin, a milk house and a pioneer barn.

The mansion, too, has been restored and appropriately furnished. Of Georgian Colonial architecture, constructed of brick manufactured on the premises and resting on a native stone foundation, the Conner home as originally constructed is typical of the very severe architecture of its period, though it is unusual to find such a home away from organized communities.

One of its most notable features is the "bee-hive," or external protruding dutch oven located in the kitchen wing. Interior woodwork is intricately carved and largely imported from the East. Floors and structural members are of native woods cut on the premises.

A two-story porch with six white columns and other details were added to the original structure during the restoration. Changes to the farm include a modern museum and heating plant and a number of modern barns, grain and implement storage facilities. Conner Prairie Farm is well-known for its pure-bred livestock.

The farm and buildings are open to the public by appointment only, and currently are being surveyed and recorded as a project of the A.I.A. Preservation Program. Edward D. James, AIA, of Indianapolis, is in charge of this program for the Institute in Indiana.

II. The following is quoted from an undated typed article prepared by H. Roll McLaughlin, Architect, of Indianapolis, Indiana:

WILLIAM CONNER

Little is known of the early life of Richard Conner, the father of William. While among the Shawnee in Ohio he fell in love with a beautiful white captive, Margaret Boyer, who had been taken from Pennsylvania. He secured her release by paying two hundred dollars and giving the onerous pledge to leave their first-born son with the tribe. After a short time they moved to Pittsburgh and later joined the Moravian settlements in Ohio, where their son James was restored to them in 1776. The date of William's birth is unknown, but it was prior to 1777.

In 1781 the hot flame of the Revolution was fanned by the Indians of the Ohio Valley, and in September the Conners with the Moravian Christian Indians were captured by hostile tribes and driven off to Detroit with great cruelty. After "standing trial" there before the British commander, the Moravians with a very few Christian Indians were allowed to settle on Clinton River twenty miles north of Detroit. The Conner family joined the settlement in 1783. There they lived a pastoral life, Richard being essentially a farmer. His daughter and four sons grew up in close contact with the Indians, the boys becoming expert in hunting and woodcraft, and learning three Delaware dialects and the languages of the Chippewa, Shawnee, and Wyandotte. Their more formal education consisted of the three R's learned at the knees of David Zeisberger.

It is said that William and John left home in 1796 for the Indian country, possibly to engage in fur trading in the Saginaw region. In 1800 William was in Indiana. In 1801 he was in one of the Delaware towns on White River, where he married Mekinges, the daughter of Chief Anderson, and was licensed by Governor William Henry Harrison to trade with the Indians. "On a beautiful moonlight night, August 12, 1802, with only the aid of a French Canadian," he finished the roof of his log cabin that stood near the river bank three-eighths of a mile north of the site of the historic brick house at Conner Prairie Farm. There, from 1802 until 1823, William

Conner conducted a thriving fur business with the Indians, trading for the pelts, goods that the Indians desired. Meanwhile, he reared a number of lusty halfbreed children, and his cabin became the center of a small village of rude huts. A prairie in the bend of the river was almost the only break in the impenetrable forest. This prairie gave an opportunity for the raising of corn - the beginning of "Conner Prairie Farm." Throughout his long life, Conner's fair dealings with the Indians and understanding of their point of view endeared him to them. Chief Labossierre once told some fellow chiefs that William Conner was the only honest man among the Americans.

In the War of 1812, William Conner served with distinction. First, he and Chief Anderson were able to quiet four hundred Delawares at the mouth of Fall Creek whom Tecumseh had attempted to incite against the Americans. Then, he assisted in opening a military road through the shadowy forest from St. Mary's to Fort Defiance. At the fight with the Indians at the Mississinewa towns, William Conner served as scout under Lieutenant Colonel John B. Campbell. His horse was shot in the thick of the fighting. He was at the siege of Fort Meigs and later fought at the decisive Battle of the Thames, afterward being called upon to identify the body of Tecumseh. He acted as interpreter at seven treaties, including the treaty at Greenville in July, 1814, four at St. Mary's in 1818, and two at the mouth of the Mississinewa in October, 1826.

In 1818 and 1819 a few other white settlers began coming into the immediate White River country. A most important year for William Conner was 1820, for then it was that the Commission chosen by the General Assembly of Indiana met at the Conner cabin to decide upon the location of the future capital of the state. In that year, too, his Indian wife, Mekinges, and their six children left for the West with the Delaware Indians, taking sixty ponies as their share of the Conner accumulations. Due to the complications of those transactions, it was not until a year before his death in 1855 that sound titles were established to all the pieces of land that Conner owned in the vicinity.

On November 30, 1820, William Conner and Elizabeth Chapman were united, in one of the earliest marriages in the New Purchase. She was a comely and competent young woman thirty years younger than he. The year 1823 was a busy one. The brick house was built for the new bride; a post office was established there; Hamilton County was initiated; and the first circuit court met on the premises. Later, Noblesville, planned by Conner and Polk, was chosen as the county seat. In 1836, Conner helped to lay out the city of Alexandria. The brick "mansion" was the center of life in the community. Interesting visitors were always there. Among others was Charles C. Trowbridge, an emissary from Governor Cass, who remained for three months to study and record the language and customs of the Delaware Indians.

In the bitter presidential campaign of 1824, the Conners supported Henry Clay against Jackson. William was that year on the Commission

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to locate the county seat of Allen County and served with two others to lay out a state road between Fort Wayne and Indianapolis. He administered the estate of his pioneer brother John, who died in 1826. He was a member of the Masonic Order being made Senior Warden of Hamilton Lodge No. 32. William Conner was a charter member of the Indiana Historical Society, founded in February, 1830. He served as State Representative in 1829-1832 and in 1836-1837. His interest in public education and transportation was constantly exhibited during these sessions.

When Black Hawk's activities spread consternation in 1832, Conner as chief scout led the contingent of three hundred men under Colonel A. W. Russell from Indianapolis to Fort Dearborn, only to return in three weeks, the war over and not an Indian seen.

He became active in securing subscriptions for stock in the Lawrenceburg and Indianapolis Railroad, and was later interested in helping locate the Peru and Indianapolis Railroad terminal in Indianapolis.

On March 1, 1837, his business and political interests demanding more of his attention in Noblesville and Indianapolis than on the farm, he held a sale of his household and farming goods at Conner Prairie Farm and moved to Noblesville. Shortly thereafter he sold out his fur business and spent the rest of his life in the more prosaic roles of businessman and dealer in real estate. He passed away in 1855, having lived one of the most interesting and colorful lives of any early Hoosier, a man honored, loved and respected by all who knew him.

Prepared by Dorothy E. Green
National Park Service
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